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Ex-C.I.A. Directors Urge Senate Panel to Protect Secrets and Agents

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WASHINGTON, April 5—Three former heads of the Central Intelligence Agency told a Senate committee today that it needed to tighten proposed charter legislation covering intelligence activities so as to protect national security information and the lives and operations of secret agents.

William Colby, who served as Director of Central Intelligence from 1973 to 1976, said, "Any overall revision of the charter of American intelligence today would be irresponsibly deficient if it did not recognize the urgent necessity to improve the legal structure for the protection of secret sources and techniques which are vital to American intelligence."

He said that recent disclosures of the identity of some agents and operations of the C.I.A. had caused the United States to lose the services of key foreign espionage contacts and had harmed its relationship with foreign intelligence services.

Mr. Colby's position was echoed by George Bush, who served as the Director in 1976, and by E. Henry Knoche, a veteran intelligence officer who served as the Acting Director in the transition of the Ford and the Carter Administrations.

In this second day of hearings by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on a proposed law to direct domestic and foreign intelligence activities, it was clear that the clamor by Congress and by the public to halt improprieties by the intelligence community had waned.

Both the members of the committee and the witnesses concentrated on the organizational factors of intelligence and the dangers of national security leaks and gave little attention to whether the proposed law corrected alleged abuses.

'Condemnatory Language'

Mr. Bush said that he was concerned that the bill contained "condemnatory language" concerning past intelligence activities. "Mistakes were made," he said. "They have long since been corrected, but this bill connotes, to me at least, that the Congress feels the problems may still exist."

Mr. Bush's testimony followed a pattern set yesterday by Clark Clifford, the former Secretary of Defense, who urged the committee to delete language in the bill that prohibits political assassination, torture, germ warfare and the violent overthrow of a democratic government.

He said that he felt such language was "demeaning" to the United States and that properly authorized operations would not use such techniques.

Mr. Colby told the committee today that he supported the inclusion of these specific prohibitions because they provided strong guidance to the C.I.A. man in the field on what was unacceptable activity.

May Last Into 1979

Mr. Bush and Mr. Knoche said that they were concerned that the proposed legislation would hamper the agency's ability to operate. "There is too much reporting" called for by the bill, Mr. Bush said. "I believe there are more than 50 references on reports to committees. The Congress should be informed, fully informed, but I don't believe it ought to micro-manage the intelligence business."

Mr. Knoche said that the large number of internal regulations engendered by a detailed, restrictive bill would "wrap the officers in red tape" and would inhibit

their imagination in carrying out intelligence-gathering assignments.

This week's hearings open a debate on regulating the intelligence agencies that committee members have speculated may last into 1979. The nation's intelligence agencies, largely unregulated, are now governed by an executive order issued in January by President Carter and by sections of the National Security Act of 1947.

Widespread support has been expressed for a charter that would set out specific controls over intelligence-gathering methods, and the Carter Administration has backed the theory of the proposal.

No witness in the first two days has opposed the idea of a charter in principle. The criticism has centered on individual provisions of the bill.